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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000792

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: SHIA-SUNNI CLASHES IN SOKOTO KILL THREE MORE

REF: ABUJA 771

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1. (U) Summary: A two-day conflict between rival Muslim groups in the northwestern city of Sokoto, seat of Nigeria's senior Islamic leader, the Sultan of Sokoto, led to the deaths of at least three people while dozens were injured. Shops, houses and other valuables were torched as Shia and Sunni activists battled each other with sticks, machetes and swords May 13-14. Police confirmed the arrest of over fifty rioters and some are expected to be arraigned in court soon. Although normalcy has returned to Sokoto so far this week, the crisis may resurface again because the two groups are fiercely engaged in their struggle for supremacy. End Summary.

#### BACKGROUND

2. (SBU) Nigeria's Muslims are virtually all Sunni, at least historically, with a few Shia and Sufi among scholars and Nigerians returning from other countries. The radical Islamic preacher Ibrahim El-Zakzaky once led a mass movement based in Zaria that was widely regarded (feared) as Nigeria's most influential Islamists. Somewhere along the way over his 25 years of activism he picked up both Iranian funding and Shia theology; it is unclear which came first. From 1999, however, Zakzaky started losing the political edge to groups favoring imposition of Sharia as criminal law in Nigeria's northern states, led by Ahmed Sani, now governor of Zamfara State, and others. Zakzaky faded into the background.

3. (SBU) Zakzaky has since rebuilt a mass movement of activists who see themselves as Shia and celebrate Shia customs such as Ashura. This may be more akin to religious branding -- to gain Iranian funding and to differentiate themselves from other radical groups recruiting from the same alienated population -- than religious conversion. Zakzaky calls his followers the "Muslim Brothers," a term usually associated by modern Islamists with the Sunni Hasan Al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but here reflecting that Zakzaky seeks like Al-Banna did to build an Islamic society-within-society. Zakzaky has long called his organization "The Islamic Movement of Nigeria," and it has a website ([www.islamicmovement.org](http://www.islamicmovement.org)).

4. (SBU) To the best of our knowledge, Zakzaky did not graduate from formal training at any of the great Shia theological centers in Iran, Iraq or Lebanon, although he has visited Iran often. His religious training is Sunni, inside Nigeria. But Zakzaky is combining his various sources of funding with various sources of recruits, drawing on northern Nigerians' combination of great anger at their society's dysfunctionality and great unemployment from it. Zakzaky has put together a large enough organization to hold rallies in many places on Shia-connotated holidays such as Ashura, and is trying to take over mainstream mosques through infiltrating their mosque committees and membership.

#### FIGHTING BEGINS

5. (U) In February in Sokoto State, at least three persons were killed and dozens injured in fighting between groups of Sunni and Shia. Zakzaky's Shia supporters claim their public commemoration of Ashura was attacked in an attempt to stop their procession, and one person was killed. They blamed the Sultan of Sokoto, who is the head of Nigeria's Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, and some days later there was a fight at the mosque in front of the Sultan's palace. Skirmishes continued off and on through March and April.

6. (U) A major fight broke out May 13 as the Shia sought to control strategic mosques in the ancient city of Sokoto. Fighting started Friday afternoon during prayers, continued until Saturday evening. There were reports of further skirmishes on Monday but sources

said the police quickly stepped in to contain the situation. Three people were confirmed dead while dozens were being treated at various hospitals for minor and major injuries. Social and business activities were paralyzed. Although non-Muslims were not attacked nonetheless some of them ran to military barracks for safety. Shops were looted while some houses and other buildings were set ablaze.

17. (U) Police authorities in Sokoto confirmed that over fifty suspects across the two groups were arrested out of which, some of them would appear in court very soon after full investigations have been carried out. Another source disclosed that the suspects may be arraigned this week. Police revealed that some suspects were legal minors and were released to their parents after seriously warning them.

WHAT'S ALL THE FIGHTING ABOUT?

18. (U) Sokoto is the seat of Nigeria's Caliphate and home of the Sultan of Sokoto, the senior Muslim traditional leader in Nigeria. There are different versions of how the fight began, once the Shia began to seek leadership roles in mainstream mosques' governing mosque committees, especially at the central mosque named for the Caliphate's founder Shehu Dan Fodio. Some on both sides say the "Sunni activists" (themselves street toughs and little better than rent-a-mobs) attacked to stop the spread of Shia doctrine in Sunni Sokoto. Apologists (or the paymasters) for the "Sunni activists" say the Shia displayed contempt and disrespect to Sunni leaders, especially the Sultan. The Shia side correspondingly claims that the Sultan is behind the attacks on Shia worshippers. The Governor of Sokoto State has tried to stay neutral, at least in public.

19. (SBU) Yahaya Sokoto, Special Assistant to Governor Bafarawa, says the state government had no plans to discriminate against any religious group but added: "All groups must respect the doctrines of others." He believes the conflict goes beyond the struggle to control the mosques, accusing Zakzaky's backers within the state of fueling the crisis for personal gain.

110. (SBU) Bloody "religious" fights stemming from socio-economic competition are commonplace in Nigeria, as are aspiring politicians egging on such conflicts for their own political gain. The local VOA Correspondent told us that the Shia seem to be making inroads into the ranks of artisans, students and other less-privileged in the society, capitalizing on widespread alienation from northern Nigeria's dysfunctional society. Zakzaky's followers' expressions of contempt for the local establishment were therefore quite appealing to these categories of people, who are also a bedrock of support for the city's traditional Muslim rulers like the Sultan. In a city where conservative traditions are strong and strict obedience to religious authority is expected, the VOA correspondent said that any insults to religious leaders could be expected to produce violence.

111. (SBU) There are, of course, other insults that can produce violence in Nigeria. The Newsweek allegations (reftel) were one, and Zakzaky was thought to be preparing demonstrations in northern cities outside Sokoto. Perhaps he was preoccupied with Sokoto.  
FUREY